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ABSTRACT

Reports of increased violence and crime in the schools suggest that an attack on the roots of violence must accompany work to improve discipline and physical security. Suggestions for schools to actively respond to the problem are offered in this digest. Reasons for the increase of violence and for most schools' reluctance to address the problem are discussed, as well as methods for teaching school nonviolence through prevention programs and early intervention strategies employed by several schools. (11 references) (LMI)

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Schools Attack the Roots of Violence

by Joan Gaustad

School crime and violence have been major concerns of educators and the public since the early seventies. According to Moles (1991), some types of school crime, such as theft and drug use, have remained level or diminished in recent years. However, some evidence suggests violent crime may be increasing.

In California, the first state to require school districts to keep statistics on school crime, the Department of Education (1989) reported that assaults in the schools increased by 16 percent in the four years ending with the 1988-89 school year; incidents of weapons possession rose by 28 percent. The lack of comparable data from other states makes a national trend difficult to confirm. In 1987, the National School Safety Center estimated that nationwide 135,000 boys carried guns to school daily (Gaustad 1991).

This evidence suggests that schools must work to improve discipline and physical security. These measures are not enough, however, to halt school violence; educators must go further and attack the roots of violence.

Why Is Violence Increasing?

Availability of weapons is one cause. According to the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, for every household in the U.S., two guns are owned by private citizens (Gaustad). It's not surprising that some of these guns fall into the hands of young people. Barrett (1991) reports that in Washington, D.C., which has one of the nation's toughest antihandgun laws, juveniles can easily buy guns on the black market. Or, for short-term use, a youth can even "rent" a weapon.

Increased gang activity and drug trafficking contribute to the escalation in violence. Battles over gang "turf" and drug territories often spill over into the schools. Sophisticated weapons financed by drug profits are making these battles increasingly bloodier (McKinney 1988).

Many students in crime-ridden innercity areas carry weapons for "protection" from robberies and gang fights, even if they are not gang members themselves. "But if they're armed, as soon as they get into an argument—boom!—they're going to use it," says James Perry, a former crack dealer turned youth counselor (Barrett).

For some students, violence is a part of life. Their parents interact abusively; violent behavior is the norm in their peer groups and community. "In addition to the culture saying it's OK to be violent, they also don't have the skills *not* to be violent," says Catherine Schar, supervisor of the Portland, Oregon, Public Schools Student Discipline Programs (Gaustad).

Are Schools Reluctant to Acknowledge the Problem?

A reluctance to acknowledge violence as a problem is all too common. Greenbaum (1989), communications director for the National School Safety Center, explains that administrators may mistakenly believe that bullying, fights, and intimidation are "just something all children go through...(but) these are CRIMES. The fact that they were committed by minors on minors does not make them less than crimes."

In addition, attackers naturally prefer to act where adult witnesses can't see and hear. Kids are afraid of looking like "tattletales" if they report problems, Greenbaum points out, so administrators often remain unaware of many violent incidents.

In recent years, gangs and drug trafficking have spread from the big cities where they originated to smaller communities and suburbs. But according to police and gang experts, some educators and community leaders resist admitting these problems exist until they have become firmly established—and much harder to fight.

Some school districts *do* courageously face the reality of violence. Following a 1987 high school shooting death, Portland, Oregon, school officials acted swiftly to counter gang activity. Superintendent Matthew Prophet held a press conference in February 1988 to announce the school board's new antigang policies. The district joined other agencies in a communitywide antigang effort and was instrumental in persuading the governor to establish a gang task force at the state level (Prophet 1990). Today, though gang violence remains a citywide problem, it has been controlled in the schools.

How Can Schools Teach Kids to Be Nonviolent?

"When a child is displaying antisocial behaviors," says Schar, "you can't just say 'Stop.' You also have to teach them prosocial skills." Curricula that teach nonviolent ways of resolving conflict are a promising preventive strategy.

Portland schools use a program produced in Seattle, Washington, "Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum" (Gaustad). Lessons work to build empathy and teach impulse control and anger management. For example, in a lower grade lesson, the teacher displays a picture of a face. "How is this person feeling?" she asks. Other pictures show groups of children in social situations involving conflict. Discussion is aimed at helping children identify and describe emotions.

In grades 6 through 8, problem-solving is added; students identify the problem and think of different possible responses. When faced with conflict, many youths see "fight" or "flight" as

EA 023 331

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the only alternatives. Becoming aware of other options is important.

The "Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents," developed by Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health Deborah Prothrow-Stith, shows high school students how violent interactions begin and escalate, and teaches them anger management and nonviolent problem-solving techniques (Greenbaum). First tested in Boston area schools, the program is now used by 5,000 schools and other community agencies nationwide, according to Millie LeBlanc of the Education Development Center (telephone interview, September 26, 1991).

Peer conflict management, which evolved from successful peer tutoring programs, is used at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Volunteer "conflict managers" are given training in problem-solving and communication skills, then act as mediators for conflicts among fellow students. Mediators use a prescribed problem-solving process to help disputants find their own solutions.

A similar program, "Conflict Resolution: A Secondary School Curriculum," was developed by the Community Board Center for Policy and Training in San Francisco. The staff and students at Woodrow Wilson High School in San Francisco have noticed a difference in halls and classrooms since the program was implemented in 1987. "More tussles are being confronted with humor...a more peaceful environment is being developed."

How Can Schools Keep Kids Out of Gangs?

Experts emphasize the importance of reaching kids before gangs do. In recent years "gang prevention" curricula have been developed in cities around the nation, including Portland (Prophet), Chicago, and Los Angeles (Spergel 1989). There is some evidence that antigang curricula change attitudes toward gangs, reports Spergel; however, it has not yet been established whether gang behavior is also reduced.

Reaching kids who are already gang-involved is more difficult, but not impossible. An alternative program, implemented in Portland schools in spring 1990, yielded promising results, according to Schar. High school students suspended for fighting, assault, weapons violations, or gang violence—most of them hard-core gang members—were required to go through an antiviolence curriculum before returning to their regular schools. Small class sizes and specially trained teachers contributed to the program's effectiveness, says Schar.

Interactions with caring adults can make a difference. Some former gang members who have turned their lives around credit the influence of officers who took a personal interest in them, says Portland Public Schools Police Chief Steve Hollingsworth (Gaustad). Ronald Huff, who conducted a two-year study of Ohio gangs, heard similar stories from a number of former gang members (Bryant 1989).

According to Spergel, many gang youth would choose reputable employment if they could; unfortunately, they usually lack the skills and attitudes needed to hold good jobs. Programs that provide job training or referrals can give kids alternatives to gang crime.

Where Can Schools Turn for Help?

Schools alone can't solve problems with complex societal origins. Experts agree that comprehensive efforts involving schools, community groups, and local agencies are much more effective. And as California crime prevention specialist Dolores Farrell points out, "There's not the money to do it alone" (Lawton).

Schools can find willing allies in the community. Portland schools work with local businesses to provide job-related programs for high-risk youths. Special instruction prepares kids for job interviews and teaches them appropriate on-the-job behavior (McKinney). Lawton describes a community antigang effort in Downey, California, in which private funding supports self-esteem programs and sports programs for at-risk youth.

Police departments and other city and county agencies are logical resources for schools. In addition, districts that have developed effective programs are usually happy to share information.

State leadership can also aid schools. In California, the state education department and attorney general's office recently drew up a model plan for school safety, emphasizing prevention and interagency cooperation. The "Safe Schools" plan spares schools the effort and expense of creating their own individual plans (Lawton). The state also provides minigrants to help districts implement plans.

The preventive programs described above are too new to have yielded long-term results. But if they produce the effects they promise, schools will have played a vital part in breaking the cycle of violence.

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